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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ DECREES FORMATION OF MILITARY RESERVES

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

[11](#). (C) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez made official his plans to increase military reserves and call up a civilian militia with two decrees published April 4. On his "Alo Presidente" program April 3, Chavez said the new military reserves will number more than 1.5 million and the rest of the population will be recruited to help defend the country in guerrilla warfare. Both groups will answer to him through the command of Maj. Gen. Julio Quintero Vilorio. Referring to Venezuela's defense restructuring, National Land Institute director and former intelligence chief Eliecer Otaiza told a reporter that Venezuelans need to learn to "hate gringos" in preparation for war, a comment rejected by the Foreign Ministry. Most opposition groups have focused their criticism on the alleged undemocratic and illegal nature of the reserves, issues that have little resonance with the public.

Clearing Up the Facts

[12](#). (U) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez issued two decrees published in the national gazette April 4 confirming he (Chavez) would command Venezuela's planned military reserves and direct the mobilization of civilians to help defend the country. He designated Maj. Gen. Julio Quintero Vilorio to oversee both projects for him. The decree called for Quintero's participation in national security planning and gave him a voice--but not a vote--in meetings of the Defense Ministry and the unified command. According to the decree, a change in a line item of the presidency's budget will finance the reserves after additional credit is authorized. Chavez also outlined his plans for reserves and for "asymmetric" (that is, guerrilla) warfare during his "Alo Presidente" program broadcast from the site of the revolutionary Battle of Las Queseras in Apure State on its 186th anniversary April [13](#). Chavez quoted extensively from the description of the battle written by hero Gen. Jose Antonio Paez to show how civilians were essential to the war effort.

[13](#). (U) Questioned about the asymmetric doctrine, National Land Institute director and former intelligence chief Eliecer Otaiza told a reporter it was necessary to start "hating gringos," since US citizens would be on the front lines of the "asymmetric war." Otaiza added that he did not agree with the thesis that Venezuela must confront the US President but not the American people. (Note: Chavez has often expressed that he has no quarrel with the American people.) Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez disavowed Otaiza's comments April 6, saying only he, as the President's foreign relations representative, can authoritatively speak about such affairs. Countering Otaiza, the Ambassador expressed regret about the talk of hatred while the United States was seeking to improve bilateral relations. Offering to resign if necessary, Otaiza then told the press he was only expressing his personal opinion, not endorsing hatred. He brushed off further questions, saying everyone just needed to get the "Mickey Mouse stuff" out of their heads because it was time to talk ideology.

[14](#). (U) Defense Council chief Maj. Gen. Melvin Lopez Hidalgo, for his part, tap-danced further on the issue of whether civilians would be supplied weapons. After attending a meeting Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel had called with senior officers March 29, Lopez told reporters that not all reservists would be armed. Denying both the militarization of the civilian population and the politicization of the military, Lopez said that "there were different ways of defending the country." Lopez explained the purchase of 100,000 assault rifles from Russia by maintaining that the replacement of the military's current Belgian FAL rifles was years overdue.

How Many Reserves Will There Be?

15. (U) Chavez announced on "Alo Presidente" that the ranks of military reserves would be increased to "1.5 or 2 million" people, and that all 25 million Venezuelan citizens would be mobilized to defend the country. At the end of the program, Gen. Quintero told Chavez he currently had only 80,000 "passive reserves." (Note: "Passive reserves" probably refers to military personnel who have left the armed forces within the last five years. These soldiers are legally obligated to return to active duty if called.) Quintero said he had asked mayors to help raise the number to 1.4 million by recruiting ten percent of the population. Without elaborating further, Quintero also alluded to the possibility of signing up 2,225,000 people.

16. (C) The current number of military reserves on the rolls is unclear, but those who are mission ready are a small fraction of the 80,000 cited by Quintero. According to a DAO source, as of 2003 the reserve force was no larger than 5,000. On the March 20 Alo Presidente program, Chavez questioned a reserve battalion commander in Barinas who said that of 3,025 registered reserves under his command, he only assembled about 700 for drills. An active duty colonel told polcouns March 30 that if the military could not keep regular troops trained, it would seem unlikely that it would be able to prepare millions of reserves for combat.

Why Reserves?

17. (U) The opposition has criticized the proposed reserves primarily by questioning their purpose. A retired military officer and legislators from both sides of the aisle debated the issue on an April 5 broadcast of the GOV-sponsored television station. (The GOV is pulling out the stops to publicize the reserves, including by running color newspaper advertisements.) In an email advocating Chavez's overthrow, a group calling itself the "national allied forces" described three "threats" the GOV planned to face with reserves: the United States, Colombia, and internal dissidents. Former Defense Minister Fernando Ochoa Antich likened the planned reserve force to Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega's "dignity battalions," which quickly disintegrated after experiencing thousands of casualties. He posited that Chavez was beefing up reserves to create an alternate force that would follow him blindly, especially in the event of another military coup. Doubting that Chavez really fears a US invasion, an editorial in an opposition-leaning newspaper commented that the reserves would be used to counter potential uprisings of civilian masses and military units.

18. (C) With the exception of Primero Justicia (PJ), opposition political parties have argued against reserves by warning of creeping authoritarianism. Christian democratic (COPEI) secretary general Cesar Perez Vivas said the GOV aimed to frighten the people and smother internal dissidence with the popular reserves, according to March 29 press reports. Movement to Socialism (MAS) secretary general Leopoldo Puchi warned that a militia would "completely distort democratic life." PJ officials, however, stuck to themes more poignant to Venezuelan voters such as unemployment, poverty, and security. One PJ spokesman listed social spending plans that could improve the living standards of millions of people if the GOV were to redirect what it allegedly spent on weapons.

The Legality of Reserves

19. (U) The opposition's objections have also focused on the alleged illegality of creating a civilian militia. Because the organization of the reserves must be defined by organic law, the opposition has argued that any changes to the force would require a two-thirds vote of the National Assembly, as stipulated in the constitution. According to press reports, the National Assembly's defense committee may submit a draft of the organic law of the armed forces, which will call for the mobilization of all willing citizens between the ages of 18 and 50 who are mentally and physically capable, to the plenary chamber in mid-April. (Note: Pro-Chavez forces do not have the two-thirds vote in the assembly to pass an organic law on the military. When faced with a similar

situation regarding the judiciary, they simply did not label the law "organic," passed a law tailored to Chavez's needs, and packed the Supreme Court.)

10. (U) Although the constitution does not specifically mention reserves, the opposition has also declared the militias themselves unconstitutional. On the other hand, the Chavez administration maintains that its initiative is in

keeping with constitutional principles. Pro-Chavez chairman of the National Assembly's defense committee Edis Rios pointed out that the constitution holds "all natives and corporate bodies" in Venezuela responsible for the national defense.

Comment

11. (U) The purported threats from the United States, from popular uprisings, and from plotters within the military probably all have influenced Chavez to increase the reserves and make them accountable to him. He also probably plans to use recruiting as a tool to stir up nationalistic support for his presidency in the manner that he employed the Electoral Battle Units so successfully before the recall referendum in August 2004. (He is keeping the same acronym.) The administration will not be able to train millions for combat, but this does not mean that Chavez will not be able to construct a corps for his "revolution." The case of Otaiza's "hate" comments shows that whenever Chavez changes his message towards the United States, GOV spokesmen will inevitably take time to catch up. We will continue to exploit the ensuing confusion.
Brownfield

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